

The unfolding of your words gives light.

The Temple of God

An Exposition of 1 Corinthians

³⁶But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin *daughter*^a, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry^b.
³⁷But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin *daughter*, he will do well^c. ³⁸So

^a 7:36 **But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter.**

There are two primary interpretations of this text and the one you take colors the way you translate it from the original. Here they are:

- The ESV (as well as the NIV) translates this with the understanding that Paul is talking to a man who wishes to marry his girlfriend (or *betrothed*, if you please).

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. (ESV)

- The word “*daughter*” has been inserted by the NASB translators. That insertion is based on the understanding that Paul is talking about a man and his daughter here. Certainly children—particularly young women in that culture were considered under parental authority until marriage.

I take the latter view for these reasons:

- The idea of a young couple deciding to marry independent of parental counsel is a later development that has to be forced on the text. This would not have been acceptable even in a pagan context.
- The “engaged couple” view hints that the “unbecoming” behavior is sexual. But the remedy for premarital sexual sin is not marriage but repentance.
- The word translated “gives...in marriage” in verse 38 has to be forced to mean something else if this is addressing an engaged couple rather than parent and child. The father gives his daughter in marriage.

To act “unbecomingly” means *subject to shame* and, in this context, likely refers to a man who has resisted allowing his daughter to marry. Paul had already said that he considered singleness a good choice in view of “the present distress.” So should fathers keep their daughters from marrying? In that culture such behavior might have been considered cruel.

^b 7:36 **if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.** The translation of this phrase hinges on your understanding of the previous one. Taking the position I have taken, I think the Paul is speaking of a young woman who has reached marriageable age. Of course this permission to marry presupposes that there is a suitable candidate who is interested in her.

^c 7:37 **But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.** Notice the four conditions. The first and fourth deal with internal resolve and the second and third deal with authority:

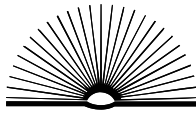
- *firm heart* (father is resolved)
- *no constraint* (there is no legal contract or financial necessity involved; same word for present “distress”)
- *authority over will* (this could mean that the man was not a slave and therefore was free to make the decision)

The Epistle of 1 Corinthians
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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then both he who gives his own virgin *daughter* in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better^d.

³⁹A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord^e. ⁴⁰But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God^{f,g}.

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- *decision* (father is decisive).

It was within a father's rights to guide his daughter's decisions while she is still under his authority. The law of Moses gave fathers a limited right of veto over decisions made by their unmarried daughters:

Also if a woman makes a vow to the Lord, and binds herself by an obligation in her father's house in her youth, and her father hears her vow and her obligation by which she has bound herself, and her father says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand and every obligation by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father should forbid her on the day he hears of it, none of her vows or her obligations by which she has bound herself shall stand; and the Lord will forgive her because her father had forbidden her. Numbers 30:3-5

^d 7:38 **So then both he who gives his own virgin *daughter* in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.** The picture of a father giving away his daughter in marriage is a timeless one. Fathers should not use this authority as an excuse to bully daughters but to seek what most honors God. The importance of decisiveness comes long before a relationship begins and is headed toward marriage. By then a young couple has begun—in Paul's words—to “burn.” A father's decisiveness needs to start when he directs the kind of young men he wishes to allow around his daughter.

^e 7:39 **A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.** Being bound to your mate by God's moral laws is a good thing. But what happens when you are no longer under that obligation? Here is a three-part summary:

- Marriage is designed for a lifetime.
- Marriage is honorable after being widowed.
- Marriage is suitable only if you are marrying a believer.

^f 7:40 **But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.** This is not about right and wrong but about personal happiness or *blessedness* in that cultural context (see a related word used in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-11). In this circumstance Paul thought a woman would be better off single. In another context he recommended marriage:

Therefore, I want younger *widows* to get married, bear children, keep house, *and* give the enemy no occasion for reproach 1 Timothy 5:14

^g 7:36-40 Either way you take this text it deals with women who are eligible to marry. What should they do? Before you say “I do” you ought to be able to answer these questions:

1. “What do my parents think of this?”
2. “Am I prepared to serve this person until I die?”
3. “Can I serve the Lord better married or single?”
4. “Is this person my spiritual equal?”

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